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ABSTRACT

This paper on at-risk students in high schools examines and summarizes the literature on characteristics of youth-at-risk, factors causing at-risk students to drop out, and effective methods for keeping at-risk students in school. Those students who are most at-risk have the following characteristics: poor academic record; low parental education level; dislike for school; little or no participation in extra-curricular activities; discipline problems; disrupted home life; low socioeconomic status; age of 16 or 17 years in grades 9 through 11; poor self-concept; inadequate goals; low aspirations; and poor reading ability. Literature related to each of these characteristics is summarily reviewed. Also discussed are reasons why at-risk teens drop out of school. These include academic failure; marriage, marriage plans, or pregnancy; dislike or lack of interest in school; discipline problems; and inability to get along with teachers or peers. The concluding section discusses 10 characteristics of successful drop-out intervention programs. These include systematic identification of at-risk youth, appropriate program organization, proper staff selection, team approach, unique or specific focus to the educational process, careful student selection, respected institutional role, administrator flexibility, community involvement, and substance abuse awareness. (RH)

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YOUTH-AT-RISK:

WHO ARE THEY, WHY ARE THEY LEAVING, AND WHAT CAN WE DO?

Dr. Sandra K. Wittenberg

January, 1988

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INTRODUCTION

Spurred by a national dropout rate of 25 percent, educators across the nation are struggling with the problem of identifying potential dropouts, determining the causes of these students leaving school, and developing ways to retain them in school. The abundance of literature regarding youth-at-risk is testimony to the scope of the problem. The available literature falls into two distinct categories:

1. identification of youth-at-risk at the elementary level and prevention programs aimed at that age group, and
2. characteristics of youth-at-risk at the secondary level and intervention programs to help the older youth stay in school.

The focus of this paper will be on the secondary level youth-at-risk with the purpose to examine and summarize the literature on:

1. characteristics of youth-at-risk,
2. causes of youth-at-risk dropping out, and
3. methods that work to prevent dropping out.

WHO ARE THEY?: CHARACTERISTICS OF SECONDARY YOUTH-AT-RISK

One of the problems with identifying youth-at-risk before they dropout is the lack of a uniform set of descriptors of dropouts. This same problem applies to accurately judging the magnitude of the dropout problem throughout the nation. Due to the varied reporting practices and definitions of who is a dropout, it is often difficult to compare schools within a district to each other, and virtually impossible to compare districts. Estimates of dropouts in urban schools often fall into the 40-50 percent range, frequently doubling the national average of 25 percent. It is only in the last few years that a somewhat uniform set of descriptors has begun to emerge in the literature. Most recently, a risk assessment instrument was devised by M. Hayes Mizell (1987).

When dropouts take that last trip out the school door, they leave behind a trail of signs. The most commonly agreed upon descriptors of youth-at-risk indicate that students who exhibit the following characteristics are most at-risk: (Cage, 1984)(Self, 1985)

1. poor academic record
2. low parental education level
3. dislike school
4. little or no participation in extra-curricular activities,

5. discipline problems
6. disrupted home life
7. low socio-economic level
8. age 16-17/grades 9-11
9. poor self-concept/inadequate goals and low aspirations
10. poor reading ability.

Some characteristic symptoms of the youth-at-risk begin to manifest themselves as early as elementary school years. As the pupil becomes older, these symptoms become more pronounced and thus make identification easier at the upper grade levels. Simultaneously, the behavior patterns which lead toward dropping out become more fixed each year, thus making the intervention increasingly more difficult. (Cage, 1984) All studies indicate that "the mass weight favoring dropping out accumulates over many years." (Austin Independent School District, 1982)

POOR ACADEMIC RECORD

Poor academic achievement is the single most common characteristic of potential dropouts. U.S. Department of Education statistics indicate that poor academic performance is the best predictor of who will drop out of school. (Rist, 1987) According to Schrieber (1979) over half of the dropouts were retained at least once in elementary or junior high school. Hewett and Johnson (1979) report that 60

percent of the dropouts were receiving "C" grades or below when they dropped out. Achievement levels and achievement motivation are likely to be low for the potential high school dropout and they tend to have been academically behind for several years. (Durken, 1981) Dropouts or at-risk students in any grade tend to achieve below grade level, have failed courses on their academic record, are in remedial or low academic tracks, and have poor academic self-esteem. At the high school level, these factors make it difficult to earn the number of credits necessary for graduation. At the sophomore level, indicators of potential dropouts include poor grades, low mathematics scores, and externalized locus of control. (Ekstrom, 1986)

A student at-risk may display deficiencies in cognitive ability, task motivation, task performance and locus of self-esteem. Direct indicators include low test scores, a minimal desire to achieve academic goals, a lack of thoroughness or logical development in one's work, and a sense of little or no control over success or failure. (Blum & Spanghel, 1982) One third of high school dropouts cite poor grades as their reason for dropping out (Urban Principals Network News, Autumn, 1986). Curtis (1983) and Massey and Crosby (1982) showed that students who have low G.P.A.'s have a higher probability of dropping out and Martin (1981) reported that dropouts had a lower than average C reading stanine scores in elementary school, as well as junior and senior high school.

Over and over, throughout the literature, low academic achievement is cited as a consistent descriptor in identifying at risk students. It is also important to note that abilities, as measured by I.Q. tests and standardized tests of performance, are of secondary importance to poor grades and grade retention in identifying students who are at risk. (Hahn, 1987)

LOW PARENTAL EDUCATION LEVEL

Low parental education level is a second factor that appears to be significant in identifying at risk youth. Youth most likely to be at-risk are those whose parents have failed to complete formal schooling. (Rist, 1987) Schrieber (1979) indicates that a significant majority of the parents of dropouts never completed high school themselves. Hewitt and Johnson (1979) report that 70 percent of the dropouts' fathers and 60 percent of their mothers had not completed high school. According to Durken (1981), high percentages of dropouts are from parents with low educational attainment levels. Rumberger (1981) reported:

"Better educated parents could influence their children's educational aspirations or they could spend more time with their children, thereby increasing their children's ability and likelihood of remaining in school."

Martin (1981) concurs stating that the educational levels of dropouts' parents were less than non-dropouts. Additionally,

one Los Angeles study (Schrieber, 1979) reports that almost 25 percent of the parents of dropouts encouraged their children to dropout, another 25 percent of the parents of dropouts were indifferent, and fewer than 50 percent of the parents of dropouts encouraged their children to stay in school.

NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL

According to the literature, students who dislike school are significantly more at risk than those who don't. (Irvine, 1979)(Hewitt & Johnson, 1979) This appears to be a very simple premise and it is almost assumed to be a given that students who don't do well in school don't like school. However, the literature indicates that this is not necessarily the case, and that the reasons for disliking school do not necessarily have to do with lack of achievement. Thornburg (1975) reports that the reasons for negative attitudes toward school involve:

1. students not learning the things they really want to learn,
2. repetitive nature of the curriculum
3. unfair treatment of students by teachers and other staff,
4. emphasis on grades, and
5. sensitivity to unkind peer pressure.

Hahn (1987) reports that another reason often cited for

disliking school is fear -- fear of gangs and fear of failure. Potential dropouts feel a tremendous sense of insecurity when they enter a school building.

Durken (1981) reports that not only are dropouts likely to view school in a negative way, but they view leaving school in a positive way. Martin (1981) concludes saying that not only are dropouts more likely to dislike school, but they also have disliked school for more grades in their entire school career.

HIGH GRADE RETENTION

Another significant factor in identifying youth-at-risk is their grade retention rate. (Sewell, Palmo, & Mannl, 1981)

According to Hahn (1987):

"Students who have been held back a grade are up to four times more likely to drop out than those who have never been held back. The reason is simple: students hate being 'too old' for the class."

Durken (1981) and Martin (1981) both report that youth-at-risk have had high levels of school failure, absenteeism, and grade retention. They also tend to be older than their grade level peers. According to Schreiber (1979) over half of the dropouts were held back at least once in elementary or Junior

high and as many as 40 percent were retained twice or more. Again it is important to note that abilities, as measured by I.Q. tests and standardized tests of performance, are of secondary importance to poor grades and grade retention in identifying students who are at risk. (Hahn, 1987)

LACK OF PARTICIPATION IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Current research shows that dropouts and potential dropouts feel that they do not belong and are less apt to participate in school wide activities. (Schreiber, 1979) According to Hewitt and Johnson, 61 percent of the dropouts were not involved in any extracurricular school activities and over 40 percent had no involvement with any organized activities in the community either. Beacham, in his 1980 study, indicated that 65 percent of the dropouts and potential dropouts indicated no participation in extracurricular activities. Durken (1981) concurs that youth-at-risk participate in extracurricular activities much less frequently than other students. Not only do potential dropouts participate less in extracurricular activities at the high school level, they also have a history of less participation in school sponsored extracurricular activities during their entire school career. (Martin, 1981) This lack of participation is indicative of the estrangement these youth feel from the school.

DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

Recurring discipline problems are another consistent predictor of youth-at-risk. In fact, chronic rebelliousness, delinquency, and truancy is the second best predictor of who will drop out of school. (Rist, 1987) Schreiber (1979) and Durken (1981) report that undesirable student behavior was found to precede dropping out. Significant behavior problems (Massey & Crosby, 1982) are not limited to the period immediately preceding dropping out either. Martin (1981) found that dropouts and potential dropouts had a long history of trips to the principal's office throughout their school careers. Blum and Spanghel (1982) relate the repeated disciplinary problems and irresponsible behaviors characteristic of youth at risk to the alienation these youth feel as a result of falling behind their peers. Anti-social behavior and discipline problems are also frequently signs of alcohol consumption and/or drug abuse. (Ediger, 1987)

DISRUPTED HOMES

A child's attitude toward schooling is first developed in the home and then nurtured in the community. Children whose home life is disrupted, either physically or emotionally, are much more likely to dropout of school than children whose home lives are stable. (Schreiber, 1979) Durken (1981) reports that youth-at-risk are more likely to have:

1. been victims of physical abuse,

2. been victims of incest,
3. been sexually assaulted,
4. experienced the loss of a family member through death or divorce.

A history of family problems is a valid warning sign that a student may be at risk. (Massey & Crosby, 1982)

"Children from broken families, where one or both parents are absent, may be less likely to find the support and encouragement needed to keep them in school." (Rumberger, 1981)

Martin (1981) concurs that dropouts are more likely than school persisters to come from broken homes.

LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC LEVEL

Low socio-economic level is also another common characteristic of youth-at-risk. Significant numbers of youth who dropout of school have parent(s) who are unemployed or employed in unskilled or semi-skilled work. (Schreiber, 1979) In the Hewitt and Johnson study (1979), over 90 percent of the dropouts reported that their social class was middle-class or below. Durken's (1981) and Martin's (1981) research verified the dropouts' own perception of their low socio-economic status. Rumberger (1981) hypothesizes that:

"Because children from poor families may feel pressure to contribute to their families' income,

they may be more likely to drop out of school and seek work."

Although this may be true, the U.S. Department of Education 1986 statistical report indicates that leaving school early inhibits a person's chances of future success.

"Dropouts have more difficulty finding and holding jobs, they make up a large portion of the long-term unemployed, and the jobs they manage to land pay less.... Moreover, dropouts swell the ranks of welfare recipients, represent lost tax revenues, and are disproportionately represented in crime statistics." (Rist, 1987)

AGE 16-17/GRADES 9-11

The typical dropout age is between 16 and 17 years of age because the law requires school attendance up to age 16 in most states and 18 in a few states. However, the psychological and emotional dropping out took place long before then. Dropping out is not an impulsive act but rather a long thought out process. The decision to leave school is based on (from the student's point of view) a rational response to personal and environmental factors.

"What is involved in the choice to persist or dropout? Fundamentally, whether a student chooses to stay in school depends on (1) his or her degree of satisfaction and (2) whether he or she thinks that

there is an alternative which would be more satisfying. Students make choices on the basis of a kind of cost/benefit analysis of perceived alternatives with an aim of maximizing personal satisfaction." (Barr, 1985)

Tenth and eleventh grades are reported as the peak years for dropping out of school in the Durken study (1981). Beacham (1980) reported that more than 50 percent of the dropouts in his study were 16 or 17 years of age and 68.1 percent were in ninth or tenth grades. Although 16 to 17 is the typical dropping out age, many younger children leave school before as a result of overloads on truancy officers and the reality of the likelihood of being able to enforce the compulsory attendance law before the child reaches the age of legal withdrawal. (Schreiber, 1979)

POOR SELF-CONCEPT/INADEQUATE GOALS AND LOW ASPIRATIONS

Nearly all studies indicate that poor self-concept is a distinguishing characteristic of the potential dropout. Schreiber (1979) reports that a youth-at-risk:

1. seems to be a loner,
2. tends to reject both school and self,
3. is usually insecure in his school status,
4. feels less respected than his peers by his teachers because of academic inadequacies,
5. feels that teachers are not interested in

him or his problems,

6. considers himself poorly treated or unesteemed by teachers and peers, and
7. is hostile toward other persons, and
8. has not established adequate goals.

Sewell, Palmo and Manni (1981) concur that poor self-concept and inadequate life goals are common characteristics of dropouts and potential dropouts. In addition to poor self-concept, at-risk youth often lack a sense of identity (Durken, 1981) and poor motivation (Massey & Crosby, 1982). Potential dropouts and dropouts also often have lower occupational aspirations than their peers. Usually, they have the aspirations similar to the occupations of their parents (Durken, 1981)

POOR READING ABILITY

Finally, youth-at-risk exhibit a significantly low reading level as compared to grade level. The dropout's level of reading achievement is significantly lower than the non-dropout. (Schreiber, 1979) Durken (1981) concurs that reading levels, achievement levels, and motivation levels are likely to be significantly lower for the potential dropout. Martin (1981) found that dropouts had lower than average reading stanine scores in elementary and junior high school, as well as in high school.

The ability to identify potential dropouts is critical to the development of any plan for prevention or intervention. If we can't or don't systematically screen students to identify at-risk youth, then we cannot begin to address the problem of dropouts in our society and prevent children from falling through the cracks in our schools.

WHY ARE THEY LEAVING?: THE REASONS THEY DROP OUT

In the early 1900's, students who left school before graduation gave reasons for dropping out such as poor health, lack of interest, and the need for their services at home. These reasons have changed somewhat. Today the reasons for dropping out are less centered on economic and survival needs and more centered around personal issues. The reasons why students drop out of school fall into three broad categories: (1) in school factors, (2) family factors, and work/economic factors. Family factors and economic factors are usually the areas emphasized by dropout prevention programs.(Webb, 1987) When at-risk youth in New York City were asked why they were having difficulty in school, about one third said it was their own fault, another third blamed home problems or other problems out of their control, and the remaining third blamed the schools.(Hahn, 1987) However, the Task Force on the New York State Dropout Problem stresses the significance of in-school factors in "pushing students out" of school:(1986)

"Closely related to the reality of personal and cultural dehumanization is the process of academic humiliation. Children of color are stereotyped as being slow learners, deprived of standard English deficient, are not taught, and not surprisingly, do not learn. Low expectations for children who come from groups of low esteem result in low levels of

teaching and learning. Thus, the prophecy is fulfilled: children not expected to learn and poorly taught do not learn. Yet the urban classrooms are filled with such children who suffer the dread of recitation, the agony of unsolved math problems, and the embarrassment of being shown up by their classmates who achieve in spite of their own victimization."

A growing body of research has documented many of the reasons students leave school before graduation. The most commonly cited reasons for leaving school are: (Self, 1985)

1. Poor academic/reading achievement
2. Marriage/Marriage plans/Pregnancy
3. Dislike for/lack of interest in school
4. Discipline problems
5. Inability to get along with teachers/peers

The reasons dropouts say they leave school correlate very closely with the characteristics and antecedent behaviors cited in the previous section.

ACADEMIC FAILURE

The "High School and Beyond" (Peng, 1985) survey data showed that the most frequently (42 percent) stated reason for dropping out of school was poor academic achievement. Thirty-six percent (36 percent) of the males and 30 percent of the females surveyed cited poor academic achievement as the most significant reason for dropping out of school.

Mayhood (1981) states that poor reading ability is the most significant reason for dropping out of school. He indicates that poor reading ability leads to school failure, which in turn leads to the compelling need to remove oneself from the setting in which failure occurs. For many youth, this removal involves nothing more than being absent or exhibiting behavior that will get them suspended or expelled. He concludes that when success in school no longer seems likely, removing oneself from the source of failure seems reasonable to most students.

For many at-risk youth, school is a place where one gets in trouble. According to Wehlage and Rutter, (1986) failed courses lead to credit deficiencies until graduation "seems impossible". In fact, upon leaving school, many dropouts experience an overall self-esteem gain to the point where they are equal in self-esteem to "the group with the greatest self-esteem", the college bound. Other researchers agree that academic failure is one of the most significant factors in dropping out of school. In another study (Peng and Takai, 1983) 39.5 percent of the male and 29.7 percent of the female dropouts studied had poor grades. A 1980 study by Beacham cites the most frequently given reason that 166 potential dropouts gave for not planning to finish high school was "failing too many courses". Rumberger's 1979 study (Rumberger, 1981) indicated that poor performance was the second most frequently given reason for leaving school.

Whether academic failure is the single most frequently given reason for leaving school or the second most frequently given reason, is inconsequential. It is clear that students who are not succeeding in school develop a "born loser" attitude and dropping out is less painful than persisting.

MARRIAGE/MARRIAGE PLANS/PREGNANCY

The reason most frequently cited by females for dropping out was marriage, marriage plans, and/or pregnancy according to the "High School and Beyond" (Peng, 1985) survey data. Of the female dropouts in a 1983 Perry and Takai study, marriage or impending marriage was cited by 30.7 percent and pregnancy was cited by 23.4 percent. Thornburg (1975) also reported that marriage, impending marriage and/or pregnancy is one of the most frequently voiced reasons for female dropouts.

Rumberger (1981) concurs that pregnancy and marriage are the two personal reasons most often given by female dropouts.

Linked with the pregnancy/marriage reasons cited by females, approximately 13 percent of the males report that they drop out of school because they have home responsibilities and have to support their family. (Hahn, 1987) Usually, this family is a new wife and baby or a girlfriend and baby.

DISLIKE FOR/LACK OF INTEREST IN SCHOOL

Dislike for school is a recurring theme in the story of why kids drop out of school. In 1952, 48 percent of the dropouts

cited their dislike for school as the reason they dropped out. By 1977, all respondents cited their dislike for school as one of the reasons they decided to leave school. (Hewitt & Johnson, 1979) Beacham (1980) surveyed 166 potential dropouts and 166 dropouts and found that lack of interest in school was the second most frequently cited reason for leaving school. Rumberger (1981) considered dislike of school to the number one school-related reason that youths, age 14-21, left school in 1979. Peng and Takai (1983) in their study of over 2000 dropouts, reported that 34.8 percent of the males and 31.1 percent of the females reported dislike for school as a factor in their decision to drop out. This pervasive dislike for and lack of interest in school is clearly indicative that the educational and social needs of these youth are not being met in the traditional school setting. This dislike for school is fostered by the students' perception that the teachers don't like them, that their peers don't accept them, and that no one cares about them. These feelings, coupled with repeated failure and frustration, are enough to make the most determined youngster lose self-esteem and hope.

DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

Discipline problems go hand-in-hand with failure and frustration. What is amazing, is that discipline problems are not more frequently cited as a reason for leaving school. In Peng and Takai's 1983 study, 13.0 percent of the males and

5.3 percent of the females cited discipline problems as a prime reason for dropping out of school. Beacham's study (1980) found that while discipline problems were a factor in the decision to leave school, they were less of a factor than academic failure, lack of interest and inability to get along with school personnel. Thornburg (1975) and Stoughton and Grady (1978) concur that discipline problems are a factor but not the most significant factor.

INABILITY TO GET ALONG WITH TEACHERS/PEERS

Linked to the discipline issue is the inability to get along with teachers and peers. Many at-risk youth feel very strongly that the teachers don't take the time to help them overcome their problems, that the teachers don't care, and that the teachers don't like them. As long as these perceptions exist, it is not surprising that 20.6 percent of the males and 9.5 percent of the females in the Peng and Takai (1983) study said that their inability to get along with teachers was a significant factor in their decision to leave school. Thornburg's study (1975) revealed that not only do potential dropouts have difficulty in getting along with their teachers, but they also have difficulty getting along with other students. All these studies indicate that the lack of personal relationship skills is a causative factor in dropping out. What is interesting to note is that as long as the youth feels he gets along reasonably well with his teachers and feels he is treated fairly by his teachers,

disciplinary problems are not a causative factor in the decision to leave school.

Other less frequently cited reasons for leaving school include the school grounds being too dangerous (Peng & Takal, 1983)(Rumberger, 1981)(Carriere, 1979), choosing to work (Peng & Takal, 1983)(Rumberger, 1981)(Thornburg, 1975) and high absenteeism (Beacham, 1980) (Stroughton & Grady, 1978). The reasons for dropping out are many and varied. Each individual's reasons are reflective of the individual's specific problems and circumstances. In one 1977 study, (Hewitt & Johnson, 1979) every dropout surveyed gave more than one reason they left school. The Public Education Association (1985) states:

"While adolescents have manifold problems, many leave school because of the nature of school itself. They haven't learned very much there and their relationships with teachers and other students is unsatisfying."

It is apparent that if we are to address the problem of youth-at-risk we must know the reasons they dropout and be prepared to deal with the those reasons.

WHAT CAN WE DO?: CHARACTERISTICS OF PROGRAMS THAT WORK

While a growing body of literature has begun to document the characteristics of youth-at-risk and the reasons why they decide to leave school, the data has been less definitive regarding the practices and factors that contribute to these youth remaining in school. It is important to remember that the issue is not just keeping the youth in school, but also maximizing their opportunities for learning. (Webb, 1987)

Traditional school programs and isolated remediation are not effective with the at-risk population.

"An effective dropout prevention program at the high school level cannot be based on one single element, such as remedial instruction or provision of social services. To succeed, dropout prevention for older youths requires a cohesive, integrated effort that combines...intensive, sustained counseling, ... an array of social services, ..concentrated remediation using individualized instruction and competency-based curricula,...effective school/business collaboration, ... Improved incentives, ...year-round schools and alternative schools, ...heightened accountability for dropouts. ...and involvement of parents and community organizations." (Hahn, 1987)

The ten characteristics common to successful dropout intervention programs are: (O'Connor, 1985)

1. Systematic identification of youth-at-risk
2. Sound organization
3. Proper staff selection
4. Team approach
5. Specific focus
6. Careful student selection
7. Respected institutional role
8. Administrator flexibility
9. Community involvement
10. Substance abuse awareness

SYSTEMATIC IDENTIFICATION OF YOUTH-AT-RISK

According to O'Connor (1985) "early identification of potential dropouts and prompt remedial assistance are essential". The most effective student retention programs establish and maintain routine, close contacts with the elementary and junior high schools. This allows the high school to provide consistent direction to the at-risk youth, without having to "rediscover" him. Some studies indicate that at-risk patterns are discernible as early as the third grade, but this information is of no use if it is not readily accessible at the later grades. Grossnickle (1986) concurs that early identification and intervention is the most important premise to a successful dropout prevention program. Green and Baker (1986) also stress that at-risk students

should be identified as early and unobtrusively as possible and that pejorative terms and labels should be avoided.

SOUND ORGANIZATION

The sound organization of a dropout intervention program is perhaps the largest, most complex and time consuming undertaking in program development. The important organizational features include:

1. Integration of counseling into the academic program, (O'Connor, 1985)(Hamilton, 1984)
2. Inclusion of vocational/occupational training and experiential learning in the curriculum, (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986)(Peck et.al., 1987) (Hamilton, 1984)
3. Integration of basic skills into the vocational/occupational training, (Green & Baker, 1986) (Hamilton, 1984)
4. Individualization of instruction, including the use of a variety of materials and media, competency-based objectives, and methods that accomodate the student's learning style, (Green & Baker, 1986)(Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) (Peck et.al., 1987)(Grossnickle, 1986) (Hamilton, 1984)
5. small classes with low student-teacher ratio, (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986)(Peck et.al., 1987) (Hamilton, 1984)

6. remedial instruction or tutoring in basic skills, (Peck et.al., 1987)
7. immediate feedback and student achievement award provisions, (Peck et.al., 1987)
8. non-traditional curricula using relevant topics and examples to teach basic skills, (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) (Hamilton, 1984)
9. emphasis on developing "special" teacher-student relationships, (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) (Peck et.al., 1987)
10. flexibility within the structure to provide credit for students' efforts and to ensure their success. (Grossnickle, 1986)
11. location away from the traditional classroom or high school (Hahn, 1987) (Greene, 1986) (Drulan, 1986) (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) (Hamilton, 1984)

The key to sound organization is to remember that no single approach will work for all at-risk youth. Each at-risk youth has a different set of problems. The organization of a program must provide for individualization of assessment, remediation and training to focus on particular needs.

PROPER STAFF SELECTION

Proper staff selection is critical to the success and effectiveness of a dropout intervention program. Because at-risk-youth tend to be among the most "unlovable" members of the student populations, teachers who work with them must

have a "fearless and empathetic regard" for them. (Lightfoot, 1983) Wehlage concurs that a committed teaching force is essential to the success of such a program. The teachers must be willing to take on the additional roles of parent, counselor, and advocate for these students. They need to have optimism that even those who have repeatedly failed and become hostile can be turned around. According to Rhodes and McMillan (1987) teachers of youth-at-risk must believe they can make a difference.

"Committed, creative leadership is needed that enables the belief in the impossible, the taking of risks, the chancing of failure, the unrelenting persistence to begin again and keep trying with different approaches until we succeed."

Cage (1984) goes on to state that not only do staff members have to be interested in and feel responsible for meeting the needs of the students, but they also must be willing to allocate time and human resources to meeting those needs. They also must be receptive to operating in a non-traditional setting and be willing to individualize and personalize the entire instructional process.

TEAM APPROACH

The team teaching approach and buddy system are used by many successful dropout retention programs. (O'Connor, 1985) This method provides more opportunities for one-on-one

Instruction, individual tutoring and counseling. The team approach also provides the student with a variety of teaching methodologies and the buddy system encourages students to develop productive relationships with the teachers. Beck and Mula (1980) reported that is essential "for educators to demonstrate feelings of love and approval toward potential dropouts, letting them know they are valuable, important individuals." The team approach provides the teachers with a valuable commodity that teachers in a traditional classroom can't have -- time to establish rapport on an individual basis with each student. (Kaplan & Luck, 1977)

SPECIFIC FOCUS

Effective alternative programs usually offered a unique or specific focus to the educational process. The traditional goals and objectives are often too diffuse for the potential dropout to appreciate. (O'Connor, 1985) Many researchers feel that programs which offer vocational/occupational training as the focus of the educational setting have the greatest degree of success. (Yates, 1979)(Langsdorf, 1979)(Cendese, 1979)(Hakanen, 1978)(U.S. News and World Report, 1980) Hahn (1987) states that programs for at-risk youth should include work, vocational skills, and pre-employment/work maturity components in addition to the basic academic services. The alternative school should provide tangible goals and expectations for which the students can strive.

CAREFUL STUDENT SELECTION

The way in which students are selected for involvement in an alternative or dropout prevention program is also an important consideration in an effective program. Ross (1983) states that alternative programs should be a choice, not a mandate. Forcing students to participate in a program or attend a school often creates resentment and turmoil.

"Students need to make a commitment to participate fully in a program if they are to benefit from it. This kind of commitment rarely comes as a result of an ultimatum."
(O'Connor, 1985)

RESPECTED INSTITUTIONAL ROLE

Although the most successful alternative programs are usually not located on the main high school campus, the service provided by the alternative school must be valued by the institution. Alternative programs should not be viewed as the stepchild of the school system. Although the alternative program may serve only percentage of the high school population, adequate funds, facilities, and support must be provided in order to maintain the program's credibility in the eyes of the school community and the community at large.
(O'Connor, 1985)

ADMINISTRATIVE FLEXIBILITY

The administrators involved with effective dropout prevention programs usually are more flexible than those in traditional programs. The administrator of an alternative program must recognize the unique needs of the students and the program. Comparisons between traditional high school programs and the alternative program must be avoided. Also, if the teaching staff is expected to be responsive to students' needs, then the administrator, likewise, must be responsive to both student and staff needs. The creative, caring administrator who is willing to "dare to fail" will enhance the chances of success in a dropout prevention program. (O'Connor, 1985)

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Another characteristic of successful alternative programs is a high degree of community involvement. Business partnerships serve two functions: (1) they get the private sector involved in funding student programs and (2) they provide opportunities for the students to apply academic and vocational learning to practical situations. Furthermore, these partnerships provide a sheltered training ground for students to embark upon their first jobs. Most community-based businesses can also provide positive role models and/or mentors for minority youth. (O'Connor, 1985) In short, the involvement of the community enriches the educational experiences for the students and reinforces the relevance of education.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AWARENESS

When youth-at-risk are involved in drug and/or alcohol abuse, the task of educating and motivating them becomes very difficult. For this reason, staff members in programs for at-risk youth must be particularly aware of the symptoms, effects and remedies for substance abuse. Caring, instead of punitive, relationships with students are critical. Since substance abuse compounds the problems of an at-risk youth, a systematic, non-judgemental referral system is critical to an effective program. Open communications and linkages with substance abuse treatment centers and support services will assist staff in aiding students deal with dependencies. (O'Connor, 1985)

Although the ten characteristics discussed here are typical of effective dropout prevention programs, several of the characteristics are key to student retention. Those strategies and methods that are repeatedly cited as critical are: (1) student-centered curriculum and methodology, (2) vocational training as well as remediation in basic skills, (3) extensive counseling, (4) self-esteem development, and (5) staff selection. These recurring themes in effective programs reinforce the literature that states that no single approach will work for all students. The integration of many components into a comprehensive and cohesive whole in which each element is strengthened and reinforced by the other

components will help insure success. When efforts are fragmented, compartmentalized, and not delivered expeditiously the potential dropout's sense of incompetence is reinforced.

We know enough to begin. We must now focus our attention and resources on the task of salvaging these at-risk youth from the frustration, humiliation, and despair of an inadequate education and help them realize their potential.

-SKW/31-

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